

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

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Symposium to discuss student achievement gap (Pine Bluff Commercial)

A symposium on the student academic achievement gap will be 8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Friday, June 7, at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff Sylvester Auditorium in Henderson Young Hall.

The symposium is open to school teachers, school administrators, parents, community members/leaders, university faculty/administration, teacher education majors, organizations, ministers and state and local officials.

The Arkansas Commission on Closing the Academic Achievement Gap and UAPB School of Education Literacy Institute are hosting the program. The theme is Bridging the Academic Achievement Gap: "It Takes a Village to Educate a Child."

There is no cost, but registration is required. Participants attending the symposium can receive professional development hours. Registration is under way and will continue through Thursday, June 6. Registration forms can be submitted by email (langbrownv@uapb.edu), fax (575-8484) or mail to Vera Lang Brown, 1200 N. University Drive — Mail Slot 4927, Pine Bluff, AR 71601.

Pine Bluff School Board approves pair of legal settlements (Pine Bluff Commercial)

The Pine Bluff School Board voted Tuesday to approve a pair of legal settlements negotiated by district lawyer Luther Sutter that will net \$5,000.

The board acted on a recommendation from district Superintendent Linda Watson during the regular monthly meeting.

"During the 2009-2010 school year the district closed several schools resulting in some administrators' contracts not being renewed," Watson said. "Under the Reduction in Force policy of the district an employee is to be offered employment in positions that they hold an Arkansas teaching certificate in before they are offered to anyone else. That was not done in this case and the administrator filed a lawsuit."

Watson said that Sutter mediated the case down from \$95,000 to \$50,000 and that the money will be taken from a fund set aside for such action.

"In the other case the district bought a bus during the 2009-2010 school year with American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds," Watson said. "It was a lemon and could not be used. At the beginning of this school year the district's attorney was asked to contact the vendor regarding the bus."

Watson said that the vendor first offered a monetary settlement but then asked that they be allowed to repair the bus.

"They repaired it but it only ran a few weeks before stopping again," Watson said. "They offered the district \$40,000 and we made a counter offer of \$60,000. They countered with \$55,000."

Watson said that because the bus cost around \$60,000 when new, a \$55,000 settlement in the district's favor was a good one.

Lunch price increase

In other business the board approved a recommendation from Watson to increase the charge for breakfast by 25 cents and the charge for lunch by 50 cents.

"Right now, 86 percent of our elementary and middle school students are on the free and reduced lunch program," Watson said. "At present, our breakfast reimbursement is \$1.85 per student. We receive 27 cents, creating a shortage of \$1.58 for the program. The lunch reimbursement for free students is \$2.88 per student and our reimbursement for paid students is only 29 cents, creating a shortage of \$2.59."

Watson said that the price increases are necessary in order for the district's food service program to be self-supportive.

Personnel

The board approved a series of personnel recommendations made by Watson.

The board approved the hiring of certified personnel for the 2013-2014 school year including Catherine Bell as an English language arts teacher at Pine Bluff High School, replacing Debbie Stewart, effective Aug. 8; Stephen Bronskill as a science teacher at PBHS effective Aug. 8; Jacob Crouch as an English language arts teacher at PBHS effective Aug. 8; Adrian Dhanaraj as an English language arts teacher at First Ward Alternative effective Aug. 8; Stephanie Johnson as a chemistry teacher at PBHS effective Aug. 8; Antonette Marbley as an elementary counselor at Thirty-Fourth Elementary effective Aug. 8; Taniesa Moore as a literacy coach/test coordinator effective July 1; Donnalie Nelson as an English language arts teacher at PBHS effective May 31; Paul Nucero as math teacher at PBHS effective May 31; Mandy Sheehan as a math teacher at First Ward effective Aug. 8; and Elise Swanson as a language arts teacher at PBHS effective Aug. 8.

The board approved the hiring of certified summer school personnel Suzette Bloodman as an elementary principal at Oak Park Elementary; and Gregory Moore as an elementary principal at Broadmoor Elementary, both effective June 3-July 23.

Shortfall projected in school-health plan (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

Despite the Legislature's attempt this year to shore up the state's health-insurance plan for public school employees, the plan will face a \$61 million shortfall next year unless premiums are raised or benefits are cut, according to preliminary projections presented to a state board Tuesday.

John Colberg, an actuary with the Cheiron financial and actuarial consulting firm, presented the projections to the State and Public School Life and Health Insurance Board as it prepares to decide on benefits and set rates for the plans covering state and public school employees.

The public school plan covers almost 83,000 people, including 47,000 teachers, cafeteria workers, janitors, and other school employees and their families.

The state employee plan covers more than 64,000 people, including 28,000 employees and their families.

With no cut in benefits, Colberg told the board, premiums for public school employees would have to increase across all plans next year by about 44 percent.

For state employees, the increase would range from 21 percent to 27 percent, depending on whether reserves were used to offset the amount.

"This isn't going to be real fun," state Surgeon General Joe Thompson, a member of the insurance board, said at the meeting. "We're either going to have to have major benefit changes or major financing changes or both."

The board will set rates in August for next year. Employees will be able to switch plans in October, with their choices becoming effective when the coverage year starts Jan. 1.

This year, the maximum monthly premium for the "gold" plan, the most popular plan for public school employees, increased by about 21 percent, from \$187.36 to \$226.70 for individual coverage and from \$848.92 to \$1,027.20 for family coverage.

Those premiums are based on a school district contributing \$131, the minimum required, toward the total monthly cost.

The premium for state employees in the gold plan did not change from 2012 to 2013. State employees in the plan pay \$95.78 for individual coverage or \$419.62 for family coverage.

Jason Lee, director of the state Department of Finance and Administration's Employee Benefits Division, said after the meeting that the projections for next year are based on claims submitted in 2012, a year the public school employees plan paid for an unusually large number of expensive medical procedures.

In 2012, the plan had \$30.5 million in medical claims that were over \$125,000 each, up from \$22.8 million in such claims in 2011, Lee said. Expenses for one premature baby last year totaled \$4 million, he said.

He expects the projected expenses for 2014 to shrink from the estimate of \$61 million as more recent months, when fewer high-dollar claims were submitted, are factored into the calculations.

"I would expect public school employees to see a combination of benefit change and rate increase, but to what degree it is just too early to tell," Lee said.

Lee announced at the meeting that he will resign as director, effective June 28, to take a job at a private health insurance company, which he declined to name. The board will interview applicants for the director position and make recommendations to Finance and Administration Director Richard Weiss, who will make the final selection.

Any change in benefits for public school employees would also affect state employees because a state law requires the benefits to be the same for both groups, Lee said. Premiums for state employees could stay the same if benefits are reduced, he said.

Starting in 2014, the federal Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act will require most Americans to have health insurance or pay a penalty of \$95 or 1 percent of their income, whichever is greater.

Lee said the mandate could increase enrollment in the public school employees' plan, but it's unclear what effect that will have on the plan's finances because the health expenses of those who have yet to enroll isn't known. The overall effect is likely to be small he said.

Bob Alexander, an attorney for the Arkansas Insurance Department who is on the board, said some public school employees might find it less expensive to enroll their spouses or children in private plans that will be offered through a federal exchange under the Affordable Care Act starting Oct. 1. Details of the approved private plans are expected to be announced in September.

The difference in premiums in the state and public school employee plans stems from how the plans are funded. The state provides about \$390 per month for each state employee, compared with about \$89 per month for each public school employee.

School districts are also required to contribute at least \$131 toward their employees' premiums. This year, the state Legislature increased the minimum contribution by the districts to \$150 starting in January, a measure that was meant to reduce the share of premiums paid by the employees.

The Legislature also allocated \$8 million in one-time funding this year to shore up the public school plan after it depleted its reserve for catastrophic claims.

Richard Abernathy, director of the Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators, said school officials warned legislators last fall about an approaching "train wreck" for the insurance plan.

He said he didn't expect the increase in the school districts' minimum contribution level to have much effect on premiums because many districts were already paying more than the \$131 minimum.

"There's an equity problem," Abernathy said, referring to the difference between what the state pays toward insurance for state employees versus public school employees. "The whole thing's going to have to be looked at."

Teacher corps to go forth in state (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

A newly created teacher corps program will send 21 recent college graduates with degrees in fields such as chemical engineering, biology, English, studio art and international studies into some of the state's high-need school districts to teach for three years.

The inaugural fellows in the Arkansas Teacher Corps, publicly announced by the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville on Tuesday in Little Rock, were selected from a pool of 125 applicants.

The fellows, who come from across the United States but are largely graduates of Arkansas colleges and universities, will begin a six-week training program next month in Little Rock in cooperation with the Pulaski County Special School District. They should be working in classrooms in central and south Arkansas in August.

"I'm excited about getting bright young minds into the classroom," Benton Brown, director of the program, said Tuesday. "These are people who are really committed to the students in the state of Arkansas and want to see them succeed. What we are doing is providing a path for them to get into the teaching profession. That's our purpose - to make an impact on students by getting them great teachers."

The corps program will provide the fellows with Little Rock housing for the tuition-free training. Each fellow will complete the necessary Praxis testing to attain provisional certification from the state by the time they start teaching in August. The school districts to which they are assigned will pay the fellows each district's regular teacher salaries and provide teacher mentors for the corps members, but the districts will pay no fees to the Teacher Corps program. The corps program will provide the fellows with a \$5,000-a-year stipend.

Tom Smith, the dean of the UA College of Education and Health Professions, said Tuesday that the university takes seriously its role in preparing teachers, but there continues to be a demand for qualified teachers throughout the state, hence the establishment of the Teacher Corps.

"We're identifying and recruiting young adults who are extremely capable, extremely bright, who didn't necessarily think they wanted to be a teacher when they started to college, but at the end of their college careers they are looking for different opportunities," Smith said. "Some have gone on to master's degree programs, they've earned Ph.D.s. They have decided that now is a good time for them to give back to the state and enter into the teaching profession."

Arkansas Education Commissioner Tom Kimbrell said the Teacher Corps is an effort to get effective teachers into parts of the state that are under-served.

“We don’t have a teacher shortage in Arkansas,” Kimbrell said. “We have capacity shortage geographically. We have people who want to teach, who are licensed to teach, but who don’t want to live in certain parts of the state. So we are encouraging our best and brightest young adults to look at this as an optional career path. When they see the impact that they can have on individual students, they will decide this is the career for them.”

Phillip Blake of Bear River City, Utah, who earned his doctorate in chemical engineering from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville in December, said he anticipates a long-term career in education.

“I could go do research at some large company - there is potential there,” Blake said. “If I really want to make the biggest impact, it would be to influence future students, to get them excited about science and technology. My goal is to bring research opportunities to the high school. I want to stay in education ... but I still want to bring in elements that took me into engineering.”

Aaron Mickens of Indianapolis, Ind., who just graduated second in his class with an English degree from the Philander Smith College, said he was motivated to apply to the program in part because he does not believe there are enough black male educators.

“I know I can be a role model,” he said, adding that as part of a fresh, new program, he also can be a change agent. “That’s perfect for me.”

Randi Henderson of Dallas, who just earned a bachelor’s degree in studio art from the Fayetteville campus, said she has always wanted to be a teacher and is looking forward to teaching either art or math in southwest Arkansas.

Casey Jenkins of Little Rock just earned a bachelor’s degree in biology from the University of Central Arkansas at Conway. He had planned a medical career but came to realize that the medical field was not a good fit, and that he enjoys developing curriculum and teaching kids attending Camp Aldersgate, which primarily serves children with disabilities.

“I’ve no teacher training at all, so this program seems like the best way to get my foot in the door,” Jenkins said. “I would love to be a biology teacher.”

To be eligible for the program, applicants had to have a bachelor’s degree in a field and have demonstrated academic success and a commitment to service.

Districts interested in hiring the fellows include Clarendon, Dermott, Hope, Prescott and Pulaski County Special. KIPP Delta Charter School has expressed an interest, as have two as yet unopened charter schools - Quest Middle School of Pine Bluff and the Premier High School in Little Rock.

The program was developed by Smith, Gary Ritter, holder of the 21st Century Chair in Education Policy, and Conra Gist, assistant professor of curriculum and instruction at the university. It is based in part on the national Teach For America model, in which recent college graduates are trained and work for two

years in some of the nation's poorest communities, including the Mississippi River Delta region of Arkansas.

Funding for the Arkansas program comes in part from the Walton Family Foundation and the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation.

NLR district digging up dreams (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

Dreams and plans for new and expanded schools in the North Little Rock School District moved closer to reality Tuesday when district leaders held an unprecedented three groundbreaking ceremonies for three campuses in one day.

District leaders and building planners donned hard hats and wielded gold-colored shovels at Meadow Park, Lakewood and Amboy elementary schools.

Two additional ceremonies are set for today at Boone Park Elementary and North Little Rock High School-West Campus - all part of the school district's \$265.5 million capital improvement program that will ultimately reduce the district's 21 campuses to 13.

All but one of the remaining 13 will be built anew or significantly renovated. The construction comes more than a year after voters in the district approved a 7.4-mill property tax increase to help pay for the building program. District savings in operating costs and state funding will also go toward the building program. The school tax rate in North Little Rock is now 48.3 mills.

"In 2005, the North Little Rock School Board created a vision for our district: 'World Class Schools for World Class Students,'" Superintendent Ken Kirspel said early Tuesday at Meadow Park Elementary.

"Since that time, we have been working diligently to accomplish that goal," he continued. "At some point, we will have to change our vision and our slogan to 'World Class Schools for World Class Students in World Class Facilities.'"

Kirspel addressed a crowd of pupils, teachers, district leaders, community leaders and construction planners while standing in front of a backhoe and a fenced-off construction site just south of the existing orange-brick Meadow Park Elementary at 400 Eureka Garden Road.

At 67,600 square feet, the new Meadow Park will be more than twice as large as the present school, he said. Classrooms will be larger in the new school, as will the cafeteria, the media center and the computer laboratory. There will be dedicated space for art and music, "discovery space" for large-group instruction and a 4,286 square-foot gymnasium, a feature that is nonexistent at the current school, built in 1967 for 200 pupils.

The new school, set to be completed in the summer of 2014 at a cost of \$13.9 million, will have a capacity of 533 pupils.

North Little Rock Mayor Joe Smith told the crowd that the city's well-being comes in part from the strength of the school district.

"We are on the verge of having one of the most premier school districts in the country," Smith said.

The districtwide building program will have a \$1.47 billion economic impact on the city," Smith estimated. It will generate millions in state and local tax revenue as well as nearly 2,000 new jobs and \$100 million in personal income.

"This is a real shot in the arm for the North Little Rock School District, and I am glad to be a part of it," said Smith, a grandfather to at least one North Little Rock district pupil.

News of the gymnasium caught the attention of Alan Ingram, 8, a Meadow Park third-grader.

"The gym is going to be the best part," Alan said. "I love P.E."

For first-grade teacher Michelle Meier, watching the early stages of the construction will be bittersweet. After teaching for five years at Meadow Park, she will be moving to Italy, where her husband in the U.S. Air Force will be stationed.

"I'm still excited," Meier said. "It's going to be a great learning environment for the students. Just a healthier, safer environment for them. All the new technology will be great. We're looking forward to new bathrooms and the gym, and our art and music teachers who share a classroom will each have their own spaces. The media center is going to be really cool.

"I'll have to come back and visit."

Later Tuesday, some of the speeches and happy sentiments at Meadow Park were repeated at the Lakewood and Amboy campuses.

Lakewood pupils sang about being part of the transition at their 437-pupil campus at 1800 Fairway.

"We are the future. We have the power. We are agents - agents of change," they sang under the direction of Principal Sarah Logan.

The new Lakewood and Amboy schools also will feature separate music and art classrooms, gymnasiums, plus expanded cafeterias, media centers and computer laboratories.

The new Amboy building, set to be constructed on a site a short distance from the current 1956-built school at 2400 W. 58th St., is projected to cost \$13.8 million and be completed next summer.

The new Lakewood, which will replace a 1954 building, will be built on property at the current school site. It will cost an estimated \$13.3 million.

"We can't wait. We cannot wait," said Jo Ellen McPherson, special education resource teacher for 11 years at Lakewood Elementary. "I spent 10 years in a portable. And right now, I am sharing the speech therapist's office. It's very tight quarters.

"Just to have new wiring and be able to use iPads will be wonderful," she added. "Right now we can only use about six at a time per wing."

Katrina King, mother of a third-grader at Lakewood Elementary and a sixth grader at Lakewood Middle, said her family moved to the Lakewood Elementary attendance zone in 2007 at least in part because of the school's good reputation, which she found to be true. But the building itself is outdated.

"My husband and I both voted for the millage increase because we knew it was important that the kids have better facilities," King said. "We have done this with too little for too long. It's time that the teachers, students and parents get the facilities that we all need to educate our children and make our community a better place."

LR increases LISA's student cap (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

Two hundred students at LISA Academy in west Little Rock will remain at the charter school next year thanks to a resolution passed by the Little Rock Board of Directors on Tuesday that increased the school's enrollment cap - so long as it follows measures to manage traffic congestion.

The board approved the school's appeal for an enrollment cap of 800 to a round of applause from the school's supporters, about 20 of whom crowded the City Hall meeting room and the hallway Tuesday night.

LISA Academy is a charter school located in two buildings at 21 Corporate Hill Drive near interstates 430 and 630 off West Markham Street. It has an expected 2013-14 enrollment of 800 students in grades six through 12 from all seven wards of Little Rock. The Planning Commission capped the school's enrollment at 600 students in 2012 because of traffic issues in the area and resulting complaints from nearby businesses. And the commission in April denied the school's request to increase its enrollment cap.

To secure the enrollment cap increase, the school has pledged to:

Hire two security officers to direct traffic before and after school for the first month of the academic year, keeping one on hand for the remainder of the year.

Stagger release times for high school and middle school students by up to 50 minutes.

Hold all sporting and other events at 5:30 p.m. or later.

Not request any additional enrollment increases.

Those promises, which the board added to the resolution in an amendment, are in addition to the improvements LISA Academy principal Luanne Baroni said the school has made since fall 2012, including enlisting administrative staff members to conduct after-school traffic and releasing middle and high school students 25 minutes apart.

"We made an unintentional mistake in not following the prescribed method of handling our zoning, but we've found a solution," Baroni said, referring to the school's request for an enrollment-cap increase from the state Board of Education but not from the Planning Commission last year.

If the school violates any of its pledges, it will have committed a zoning violation. That would mean fines of up to \$1,000 a day. The school obtained a conditional-use zoning permit when it opened in 2004, allowing it to operate in a commercially zoned area rather than one zoned for schools. But as enrollment grew, traffic built up in the area, said Richard Worsham, who owns a law firm in the area.

"The damage [the traffic] did to my business, candidly, was substantial," he said.

Worsham said traffic on Executive Court was often so backed up that clients couldn't enter his office and instead had to meet at a bank a block away. His courier service refused to do business with him because it considered the traffic buildup too dangerous, and he said he had to drive the wrong way down a one-way street and go around a curb in order to park at his firm.

But that was last year, Worsham said.

Now, city officials say traffic has improved.

"We've had staff on the campus literally every school day to watch dismissal and observe the queuing and stacking and picking up," said Dana Carney of the Planning and Development Department. "I think the addition of multiple school staff has made a tremendous improvement. There's a [coach] out there with a whistle that just scares me."

But area business owners worry that the school won't hold up its side of the bargain.

"LISA is on good behavior and has been for the last 30 days since they were defeated in the planning commission," said Terry Moore, who owns commercial property on Executive Court. "My fear is that after this is all over with, it will go back to what we've experienced in January and February."

After assurance of the penalties involved in the agreement, Moore gave the resolution a vote of support.

"I feel good about that," he said. Then, turning from the podium to face more than a dozen students and parents in the audience, he said: "LISA Academy, I want you to know that I'm your neighbor. I've always been a proponent of education, and the fact that you're here educating our children - I'm for that."

Teenager, ex-beau shot near arena (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

A Parkview High School senior was shot outside Verizon Arena after she finished practice for Tuesday night's graduation ceremony.

Jasmine Fisher, 18, was "shot at least once" while on her way to her car, according to North Little Rock Police Department spokesman Sgt. Brian Dedrick, who said officers found her wounded outside the arena.

Officers also found Christian Jackson, 20, suffering from a gunshot wound and lying on the grassy slope west of the arena near the Arkansas Sports Hall of Fame.

Dedrick said Jackson, in a murder-suicide attempt, shot himself in the head after shooting Fisher, whom Dedrick described as an "ex-girlfriend."

The round didn't penetrate Jackson's skull, Dedrick said, and he was taken to a hospital and is expected to pull through.

He will be charged with criminal attempt to commit capital murder, according to police.

Fisher's wounds were not life-threatening, Dedrick said, and she was "doing good" Tuesday night at UAMS Medical Center in Little Rock.

The shooting occurred about 11:20 a.m. Tuesday, Dedrick said, and officers and arena employees put the arena on lock down, keeping Parkview High School students, as well as McClellan High School students who'd arrived early for their graduation rehearsal, indoors.

Students at the scene said the rehearsal began about 8:30 a.m. and ended about 11 a.m., which was when Fisher started to walk off the grounds to her car.

She was met by Jackson, police said. Dedrick said witnesses described Fisher as being alarmed by Jackson, and turning quickly and walking back toward the arena. Moments later, gunfire broke out.

"It looks like a domestic type deal ... a boyfriend-girlfriend type of relationship," Dedrick said. "She was threatened for some reason when she saw him and turned around ... For some reason she was scared of him."

Dedrick, as well as Little Rock School District officials, said the shooting wouldn't interfere with the evening's graduation ceremonies. Dedrick said North Little Rock police will "beef" up security for the events.

One Parkview senior, Christian McElway, who had left the rehearsal before Fisher, said he saw the man rolling on the ground after he shot himself.

He said he knew Fisher and was told that she and her boyfriend were on the outs.

"Everybody thought [the shooting] was a prank, like it was fake," McElway said. "But it ain't fake anymore."

Jackson's aunt, Krista Woods, was at a Kroger when her sister, Jackson's mother, called and told her there had been a shooting. Standing outside the crime-scene tape, Woods watched detectives measure the markings from where her nephew fell.

"Disbelief. They loved each other. They've been together for years," Woods said.

According to Woods, Jackson and Fisher were engaged. But Woods said she knew the two had been having some "space" issues of late.

"He's always been a protector. I'm in disbelief. A passionate crime ... I can't believe it happened," she said. "How does it come to this?"

Storm Shelters in Beebe Schools (KARK, Channel 4)

Video available at http://arkansasmatters.com/fulltext?nxd_id=665282

BEEBE, AR -- The hallway at the Beebe Early Childhood School is the way students get to and from class. But when tornadoes threaten to disrupt class and lives, the hallway turns into a storm shelter -- packed with every child, every teacher, and every staff member.

"It's a comforting factor that our parents and community know we can get our kids into there and very quickly," said Hal Crisco, the school district's assistant superintendent.

Crisco showed KARK the storm shelter, a shelter that's in or near every school in the district.

It's FEMA-approved, lined with heavy doors which could withstand winds up to 200 miles per hour.

"It's amazing to see how quickly our teachers and staff can get them into these safe areas and get them secured," Crisco said.

The idea for shelters came after the devastating twister in 1999 that mauled many buildings in Beebe, including one of the schools.

Every new school or remodeled one since then has a storm shelter. School leaders plan four drills a year so students know what to do.

"I think our students have seen the results seeing what happened in Oklahoma and the misfortune. It's a serious situation," Crisco said.